

US food drops: a cynical propaganda exercise

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Claims by the US government that its food drops over Afghanistan are aimed at feeding the hungry and demonstrating to Afghans that the military bombardment is not directed against them are utterly cynical.

As waves of warplanes and cruise missiles began striking Afghanistan last Sunday, the US military sent two C-17 military transport planes from the Ramstein air force base in Germany to release 37,000 one kilogram packs containing ready-to-eat, meatless barley gruel, bread, peanut butter and a fruit bar—along with propaganda leaflets and portable windup radios tuned to just one frequency—a US military radio station.

With the US military pounding Kabul, Jalalabad and other cities, these bright yellow food packs emblazoned with the stars and stripes are designed to come fluttering from the sky with the message: “This is a food gift from the people of the United States of America.” To add to the absurdity, the packets come complete with a moist towelette similar to those provided in fast-food outlets.

Aid agencies have been warning that the combined effects of two decades of war and a three-year drought, compounded by the current US air attacks, could leave up to 7.5 million people in Afghanistan without food. Many are already facing starvation, along with the collapse of health care and other basic requirements of life, such as clean water.

According to the Taliban regime, local people in the eastern provinces of Logar and Paktya near the Pakistan border have refused to eat the food and are burning the packages in protest. “This food and aid has been given to the Afghans in exchange for blood. It is a mockery and dishonour to the people of Afghanistan,” Taliban diplomat Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef said in Islamabad. The Taliban claim that several hundred civilians have already been killed in the US air strikes including at least 50 in a village near Jalalabad. The US has

conceded that four UN workers involved in the detection and removal of land mines were killed in air strikes.

Even US officials have been compelled to admit the food packages are a drop in the ocean when measured against the humanitarian disaster unfolding in the country. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld contemptuously told reporters: “It’s quite true that 37,000 rations in a day do not feed millions of human beings. On the other hand, if you were one of the starving people who got the rations, you’d be appreciative.”

While insisting that the food is being targetted to areas of the greatest need, US officials have refused to reveal the locations. The very means employed indicate a total lack of concern as to whether the parcels will actually be used or not. Refrigerator-sized crates are pushed out of the back of the transports from altitudes of between 20,000 and 30,000 feet without parachutes. The crates are meant to open releasing the individual packages. Not only is the method inaccurate, but, if the crates fail to open, they pose the danger of injuring or killing people, as happened in similar operations in Bosnia and Iraq.

A number of aid agencies are highly critical of the food drops, pointing out that the method is inadequate and arbitrary. Geoff Prescott, head of Medecins Sans Frontieres in Pakistan said: “It’s a bit like throwing a bundle of five pound notes up in the air in Oxford Street. The people who grab the notes first will not be the needy and vulnerable.”

The untargeted drops could also result in much of the food ending up in the middle of the country’s numerous unmapped minefields. Alhaj Fazel, who works for a de-mining agency, warned: “When the food lands, these desperately hungry Afghan people will simply rush towards it. Women and children are the most vulnerable.”

People may also fear that the packages are booby-trapped or poisoned. There is nothing to inform Afghans about the purpose or content of the parcels, since the labelling is in English, Spanish and French, not in any of the languages spoken in the country.

The truth is that the food drops have nothing to do with preventing hunger and starvation or even at winning “the hearts and minds” of the Afghani people. The packages are a crude propaganda exercise aimed at an international audience and designed to disguise the real aims of the US aggression against Afghanistan.

Even Mediciens Sans Frontieres felt compelled to remark: “This is not a humanitarian operation. It is part of a military campaign designed to gather international approval of the attacks. It is virtually useless and may even be dangerous. What sense is there in shooting with one hand and distributing medicines with the other.” The agency pointed out that any medicine that reached the ground undamaged would be useless without health care workers to administer it.

The British-based agency Oxfam condemned what it called “US bombs and food strategy” saying: “It’s certainly not something that we can applaud. Untargeted food drops are one of the worst delivery strategies.” The organisation said that 10 times as much food could be brought in daily by trucks.

Aid agencies are particularly concerned about the plight of people inside Afghanistan—both those inside refugee camps and those who lack the money or the means, or are too sick, to leave the villages. With winter due to start in six weeks, many will be trapped in inaccessible areas with no food unless relief can reach them soon. “We are in a race against time to send food into Afghanistan. It is one of the most difficult tasks WFP [World Food Program] had faced in its history. The harsh winter is approaching and many human lives are at stake,” a WFP official said recently.

Convoys have begun to move again after aid agencies called them off at the start of the strikes. But they could be halted at any time. Even prior to the bombing campaign, only 900 tonnes of supplies a day were reaching Afghanistan, less than half of the 2,000 tonnes a day considered the bare minimum to feed the population.

There are no accurate reports of the number of refugees fleeing the bombing. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is planning for an

influx of up to 1.5 million displaced people into Pakistan. But it is being hampered by the lack of money and red tape in that country, which has closed its borders to Afghans and allocated barren, insecure areas for refugee camps.

The UNHCR is still \$23 million short of the \$50 million required for the first phase of its contingency plans in Pakistan. UNHCR chief Ruud Lubbers commented yesterday: “We are in a real race against time—and right now we are losing. Unfortunately, we are not receiving the support—in the region or internationally—that we need.”



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